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Israel Drops Key Part Of Defense of Raid

No Longer Says Iraq Threatened N-Attack

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Israel has quit using a key element in the defense of its attack into Iraq after the United States raised questions about the matter.

At issue was Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin's statement that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein had made a nuclear threat against Israel.

American officials, meanwhile, said yesterday that U.S. intelligence had no evidence that Iraq planned to use the nuclear plant attacked by Israel to produce atomic weapons or that there was a secret bomb-making facility underneath the reactor.

U.S. officials said yesterday that they had been surprised when Begin, at a news conference two days after the June 7 Israeli raid on the Osirak nuclear reactor near Baghdad, quoted Hussein as making the threat.

Begin said that after an air raid on the reactor last September by planes reportedly from Iran, the official Iraqi newspaper Al Thawra quoted Hussein as saying on Oct. 4, 1980:

"The Iranian people should not fear the Iraqi nuclear reactor, which is not intended to be used against Iran, but against the Zionist enemy."

This quotation was widely publicized by Israel as a justification for its destruction of the reactor, which it insisted was intended to produce nuclear weapons. Iraq has repeatedly denied that the reactor was for anything more than peaceful nuclear power.

The State Department queried the Israeli government about the veracity of the quotation. At the same time, the U.S. government made efforts on its own to track down the quotation.

Nothing like it, however, could be found in Al Thawra either here or in Israel. Finally, a similar statement was found in an editorial in another Iraqi newspaper, Al Jumhuriyah. The statement was not connected with Hussein.

The Israeli Foreign Ministry then informed the U.S. government of the error. It also sent out word to Israeli missions abroad to delete the quotation from its justifications of the raid. Israeli Ambassador Yehuda Blum reportedly had planned to use it as a major element in his speech to the United Nations Security Council on the raid.

In a television interview Sunday, Begin said he had erred in attributing the quotation directly to Hussein. But he repeated that the statement has appeared in Al Thawra, although his experts had found otherwise.

U.S. officials said yesterday that Begin also had been wrong about there being a secret underground chamber beneath the Iraqi reactor "where they were preparing to build bombs."

Begin had said the chamber had been hidden underground so that inspectors of the International Atomic Energy Agency would not find that the reactor had a purpose other than generating electricity.

Begin said the chamber was 40 meters (130 feet) underground. The following day he telephoned a news agency office in Tel Aviv to say he had misread some official papers and the chamber was only four meters (13 feet) underground.

According to U.S. officials, the supposed chamber was a normal part of the reactor's foundations.

A State Department spokesman, David D. Passage, was asked yesterday if the United States accepted the Israeli position that Iraq was preparing to make nuclear bombs. He replied, "That is not the conviction of the American government. That is not the consensus of American intelligence."

Passage added that there was no reason to believe that Iraq was violating its commitments to use the reactor only for peaceful purposes.

The spokesman was less blunt when asked about stories in Jerusalem newspapers that U.S. intelligence reports had been supplied to Israel about the Iraqi reactor. The stories said Israel had determined that Iraq could make bombs on the basis of U.S. information.

Passage said he could not address that question directly.